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by Ryan Torok

September 3, 2014 | 12:40 pm

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Esther Macner

At 62, Esther Macner radiates feistiness and confidence.

During a recent interview at the Journal's headquarters, she described herself as an "Orthodox Jewish feminist, which I've been all my life, before the word became a label."

A former prosecutor and trial attorney in New York, Macner moved to Los Angeles just five years ago and is now poised to become an increasingly important presence in the Los Angeles Modern Orthodox world. Her focus is the crisis of women, known as *agunot* — literally "anchored" — who are stuck in dead marriages, unable to make their estranged husbands grant them a Jewish divorce decree, known as a *get*. Less than one year ago, the mother of two and grandmother of two established the nonprofit Get Jewish Divorce Justice to advocate for these women who are unable to remarry without risking their status within their faith community.

For Macner, the issue is deeply personal. She believes the Jewish legal system enabling the creation of *agunot* is "an embarrassment to me and a painful blemish on my identity."

And while an *agunah* cannot remarry or have more children beyond those she had with her husband, he, if he can obtain the permission of

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100 rabbis, is allowed to take a new wife and create a new family.

To that end, Get Jewish Divorce Justice, along with several area rabbis, is organizing an event called “Retying the Knot, Unchaining the Agunah,” at which Orthodox married couples will sign postnuptial agreements, a legal vow to be fair to one another should they ever decide to divorce.

The event, which is free and open to the public, will take place at The Mark on Pico Boulevard from 9:30 a.m. to noon on Sunday, Sept. 7.

The agunah issue took the local limelight last March, when a group of Angelenos, including a few prominent Modern Orthodox leaders, traveled to Las Vegas to stage a rally at the second marriage of a former L.A. resident, Israeli Meir Kin, who was continuing to refuse a get to his first wife, Lonna Kin. The Jewish Journal ran a cover story about the Kins headlined “Till Get Do Us Part.”

Macner’s mission with her fledgling organization is to let women caught in such marriages know that her group is a resource for help.

In the Orthodox community, postnuptial agreements can be created by couples who never entered into *halachic* prenuptial agreements before getting married, and the documents obligate married couples to settle a divorce in a reputable rabbinic court, among other things.

Corrupt rabbinic courts have been part of what leads to agunah cases, Macner said, by allowing the husband to find ways to escape the marriage for himself — or sometimes even to attempt to extort money from the former wife.

Many of the L.A. rabbis who participated in the Las Vegas rally, including Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky of B’nai David-Judea Congregation; Rabbi Kalman Topp of Beth Jacob Congregation; and Rabbi Ari Segal, Shalhevet’s head of school, are among those participating in Sunday’s event.

Rabbi Elazar Muskin of Young Israel of Century City also will be at the event.

Rabbi Yona Reiss, a member of the Chicago Rabbinical Council, will present a talk titled “The Origin and the Urgency of the Halachic Prenuptial Agreement.”

More than 450 agunot are believed to live in the United States.

Part of the problem is that there is no official registry of agunot keeping a count, Rabbi Jeremy Stern, executive director of the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot (ORA), which organized the Las Vegas action, said in an interview at the time of that rally.

Here in Los Angeles, Macner is currently seeking volunteers for a task force that will reach out to “agunot who are in need of assistance,” a recent email from her organization said.

Macner told the Journal that her efforts to raise awareness about agunot, including integrating prayers for agunot into the *tehillim* (psalms) readings at synagogues, have successfully helped resolve the cases of several women.

Get Jewish Divorce Justice, with just two staff and no office space, is smaller than the better-known ORA, but its goals are similar — the “prevention of abuse in the Jewish divorce process, through education, advocacy and individual counseling,” an online biography for Macner reads.

Macner said she views herself as a “liaison” among the rabbinic community, the victims, and the rabbinic courts, which often don’t work

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together in ways that might lead to resolving agunah cases, she said. For instance, women are not always comfortable discussing their situations with the male rabbis of the rabbinic courts, she said. Being an insider and understanding these issues helps her, she said: "I've always been Orthodox, and I have always worked from within the community."

Macner said she is also interested in forming a support group for women who have undergone these challenges to focus on healing through the arts. She is working to create a theater piece telling real women's stories, which she called "The Agunah Monologues."

Macner draws on her experience as a trial attorney and divorce mediator, specializing in "family law, domestic violence and rabbinic court representation," according to her biography. She is a graduate of Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, received a master's degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a bachelor's degree from Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Macner and her husband, Chaim Plotzker, live in Pico-Robertson. She jokingly describes the union as a "mixed marriage" — she attends services at B'nai-David Judea, and he attends Young Israel of Century City.

Together they also attend the Happy Minyan, a Shlomo Carlebach-style congregation, she said.

Prior to taking on the agunah issue, Macner worked as an advocate for the advancement of women in Orthodox circles, including creating a shul in 1980 where women read from the Torah and said Kiddush, and where young girls sang *Adon Olam*.

As she made her way out of the Journal's office, where the interview took place, a final question from a reporter stopped her in her tracks.

"Why be Orthodox if you're a woman today?"

Macner admitted to having some differences with the Orthodox community, in particular the way its laws can marginalize women.

But she said she can't "divorce" herself from living a life based on halachah, disagree with it though she might.

"It's too high a price to pay to have someone deny their identity," Macner said. "If something is wrong, you need to change it from within."

For more information on the event, and to RSVP, visit <https://www.facebook.com/RetyingTheKnot>.

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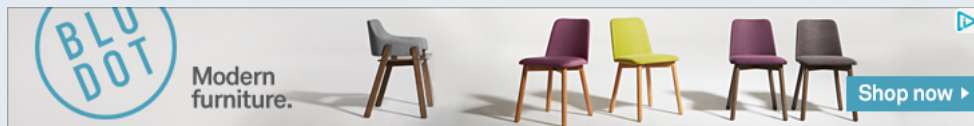


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